Chapter II

MAN AND WORLD

771 Bang Chan had for years heard preaching from Buddhist scriptures. Co-existing with these teachings were Hindu elements referring to Brahma, Shiva, and others. People also believed in an animistic lore concerning frightening ghosts and spirits (phī), protecting deities (thēwadā), maternal goddesses, princely spirit-lords, and other supernatural guardians of a more or less benevolent nature. To these beliefs were added special bodies of knowledge, such as sacred literature from India and traditions of astrology from both China[8] and India. Other elements might be traced to Muslim influence, just as Muslims shared some of the foregoing references with their Buddhist neighbors. Bang Chan shaped its views of nature and man from all these sources. However, we shall not try in what follows to specify the sources of its beliefs.

The Human Body

826 774 184 192 The body of flesh, blood, bones, and other materials, harbored the noncorporeal aspects, in particular a person's merit story (kam; Skr: karma) and his several souls, viz., the khwan, the winyan, and the four chētsaphūt (cf. J.R. Hanks, 1959). Views of the human body formed no unitary system, but were as varied as their origins. Thus, sometimes villagers distinguished the material from the non-material: "a human being is composed of two aspects: rūp (body) and arūp (non-body)." Sometimes learned persons referred to the Hindu-Buddhist concept of 32 parts of the body, one of which, the winyan-soul, was the "organizer" of the others.

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8. No trace was discovered of the Chinese concept of Yin as female, dark, cold, and evil, etc., and Yang as its opposite.

[115] 9. Ming (Mc.F. 838) was once given as a term for "soul" by a Muslim informant, but without further information.

Influences on Health

In Bang Chan, a discussion of sickness and health merely in terms of element balance would be true but insufficient, or even superficial. After all, whether manipulated by oneself or by a professional curer, elements could only be controlled within certain limits. Far deeper questions were posed, probing the ultimate nature of health, life, and death. What determined the particular proportions of a person's 4 elements with which he had been born, and whether he had, say, a preponderance of wood from Jupiter or gold from Venus? The immediate answer of astrological confluences on the date of birth would be true, for each day had its own qualities and aspects, but it was not enough. Why had he been born on that date to that set of governing factors? In life, why did one person meet the circumstances that created illness, while another lived in glorious health? The answers to these questions must be sought in the Buddhist moral and cosmic beliefs.

The Buddhist universe operated on a principle of immutable law. Each person received his just due, suffering for his own sins, enjoying reward for his virtue. There was no personified deity to help, forgive, or blame. Moreover, attachments were the cause of sorrow. Because existence was fraught with desires, all life was basically painful. Even flashes of happiness by their cessation caused sorrow.

In this universe and on this earth, individuals, each a unique and independent entity, were born to live and die, over and over again, throughout eons of time. They bore no relation to each other. Separate and autonomous, each was in charge of his own destiny. All beings formed a single grand scale of existence from demons in hell, through such lowly creatures as worms and insects, upward through dogs, cats, buffaloes, and elephants to mankind, then on up to angels and gods in the last paradises before the peace of Nipphān (Nirvanà).

The insight of the Buddha showed the way to break the sorrowful eternal cycle of rebirth and reach Nipphān. The Buddha perceived that meritorious behavior caused one to progress up this ladder of existence toward freedom from incarnation. In each life merit (bun) could be accumulated by compassionate behavior: caring for priests, and being kind and generous to persons less able to care for themselves. With merit one's next life was happier and freer of restrictions. A dog had more merit than a worm, a buffalo than a dog.

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775 Man was higher on the scale than woman.[28] Progress toward
[562] Nippban was not assured but had to be earned. With sinful behavior a person might be catapulted back to being a beast. He who stole would "be born and die 500 times before he could even grow up." Almost everyone had to be sent to purgatory
[776] where demons carried on tortures until he had suffered enough to be released for rebirth. The evil spirits (phī) that wandered frighteningly in Bang Chan were part of the legions whose job was to increase deserved suffering on this earth.

771 The people of Bang Chan felt they could discern even
782 of themselves who was meritful and who was not according to
828 human circumstances, constitution, and behavior. A meritorious person was healthy, happy, and successful in all undertakings. He enjoyed good health and long life, a kindly personality, many fine children, wealth, high status, intelligence, and luck. Astrologically, he was born on a day
[775] of good confluences, of gold and auspicious signs. He who lacked merit, because of sins committed perhaps many ages ago, was born on an unfortunate day. He suffered early death, deformities, unhappiness, poverty, and had a cruel nature.
[153] Illness, whether supernatural or natural, whether induced by wind or sorcery or what, struck as part of the suffering brought on by former sin. It was accepted in the conviction that whoever suffered had brought it on himself. When merit ran out, or when sin cancelled out and then exceeded one's merit, suffering and premature death occurred, despite all human efforts. Because of the prevalence of illness and of life's difficulties, major and minor, no one, no matter how outwardly fortunate and so evidently meritorious, had at this earthly level of existence enough merit to escape some suffering and frustration. By the same token, though, no person was without hope. By making merit or by suffering in this life, existence would be happier in the next. The making of merit was in the forefront of daily conscious effort and even conversations of the people of Bang Chan.

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784 The long-range protection against all illness was to
[577] live virtuously and make merit. However, to guard against temporary supernatural intrusions, everyone possessed and
[782] usually wore Buddha lockets and other amulets. Some
[304] underwent tatooing, men having Cambodian or other figures, women, 2 small dots tatooed on the torso under the arm.

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28. Men had achieved greater "other-worldliness" while women were more bound by the phenomena of the flesh (cf. Kirsch, 1961).

843 [775] She might also be troubled by the ghost of anyone who had died violently. This ghost, a phi tai thang klom, caused "the worst of all possible deaths." The phi krasu spirit,[25] entering through her anus, also might cause death by consuming her faeces, organs or the child's entrails. It was more dangerous during and after childbirth than during pregnancy (Textor:304-320). [753] The supernatural disease missile called "khun" might also strike. "If the mother is under 9 months pregnant, the baby inside can protect (itself). If this happens during the ninth month, the doctor uses holy water to extract it at the time of birth." Khun was recognized by "extra pain occurring just before the baby comes out." To protect themselves, women wore extra talismans or had 7 dots tattooed under the arm. [751] [304]

843 845 There was no assumption that what was born was inevitably to be human. When people said of a woman who had died pregnant, "the child ate the mother;" or, at a miscarriage, "the mother ate her child," or if many of a couple's children died, "they eat their children," the charge might be merely the comment of a vituperous neighbor, but the reality of vicious, autonomous beings, human or otherwise, in the womb was unmistakable. A certain woman died pregnant. The fetus, removed surgically, was observed to have 7 visible teeth, which indicated it was a non-human, yak (giant). However, a child might also be the soul of an angel in the form of a falling star that entered the womb in the advanced stages of pregnancy. "If such a baby lives it is pure and is a very wonderful child." Episodes were described of woman giving birth to "gold," "jewels," "a monkey," "a fish's stomach," and a mouse-like "Golden Child." Sometimes these

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[771] [783] [514] [262] 25. This spirit ate like a dog, not like a human being, in eating faeces and putrid meat (McF.46). No revulsion nor idea of filth and contamination was found in Bang Chan's attitudes about faeces or urine. The infant in the womb sat peaceably on the mother's faeces. It was lucky to dream of faeces. In daily life human and animal excretions, like sins at the festival of Loy Krataung, were carried away by the canal waters. Bang Chan Buddhists recognized a need for cleansing, but not for purification. Since neither faeces nor sins were filthy the water was not contaminated. Even putrid meat was not disgusting in the context of the perishability of the flesh, but as food it was revolting. Muslims, however, had built in contamination to their concept of sin, so required purification.

4:Phillips E-4,5 (1956-1957) 1966
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bringing them into the world; of helping siblings because of the kind things they have done; of loving children so that they will care for them when they are old [11]—but they do condition how and when such sentiments will be expressed. It is difficult to recall any instance of a Bang Chaner being caught in a situation of which *he was aware of* a conflict between satisfying his own desires and fulfilling his obligations to kin, so it is difficult to say which sentiment would ordinarily take precedence in his own mind; but to an observer, it would seem that the former would most likely have priority. (See Hanks and Phillips 1961 for evidence in support of this point.) [12] Actually, most villagers seem eminently successful in keeping the sentiments apart, which helps to account in part for the "centripetal" forms of kinship arrangement referred to earlier. Self-interest is of course not the same as selfishness, and when circumstances and inclinations permit, Bang Chaners can become among the most generous and hospitable of people (and in no sense paradoxically). Rarely have I seen, for example, people derive so much genuine pleasure from doing favors for others. In fact, these are among the first things that one notices about them: free agents helping others—but also ignoring them—when they see fit.

[11] This phrasing here in terms of *reciprocal benefits* is in the villagers' idiom, not mine.

[12] It is not insignificant that nowhere in Thai folklore does one find a recognition of possible conflict between the motives of self-interest and family obligation or of any moral lesson to be drawn from it; that is, there are no stories of a parent sacrificing himself for his children, or of children for their parents or, for that matter, of any moral value at all in self-sacrifice. On the other hand, one does find stories of individuals in conflict over which of two self-satisfying alternatives to select. In *Khun Chang and Khun Phaen*, for example, Wan Thong, the inconstant lover, could not make up her mind between love and wealth, and eventually was slain because of her indecision, the moral being that the person who cannot make up his mind deserves nothing.

On a more realistic level, one rarely finds anyone in Bang Chan being condemned for self-interest—the mother who abandons her children or the gallivanting husband—although one very frequently does encounter sympathy for those who suffer, the sympathy being elicited by the person or the fact of suffering, not the cause. The majority of Bang Chaners generally consider the motives of the self-interested party as the person's own business. This concern with sympathy (*soyaam*) for those in difficulty, and simultaneous indifference to the source of their problem has deep roots in Buddhist doctrine and should not be glossed over.

To have compassion (*mettaa* and *karunaa*) is among the noblest of Buddhist virtues. It is at one time a kindly expression of concern with others and a recognition of—or coming to terms with—what is considered intrinsic to the human situation. "Life is suffering" is the first of Buddhism's Four Noble Truths. However, since such suffering is intrinsic, there is little to be gained by assigning blame for it. Equally important, villagers assume that a person who suffers may well have brought it upon himself. The other person, acting in his own natural self-interest, may have simply been an agent or catalyst. His motives are his own business because they will eventually contribute, for better or worse, to his own denouement. The dynamics of these attitudes are discussed in detail in the next chapter.

4:Phillips E-4,5 (1956-1957) 1966
AO7 Central Thai AO7
Bang Chan

lying configuration.) However, from the point of view of their etiology in the individual, it is clear that the villagers' tendencies toward loose relationships are related to early childhood experiences. A second source is their philosophical notions concerning the nature of the individual. These notions are largely cultural derivatives of Buddhist doctrine, although at the behavioral level they function simply as unstated premises which guide and tacitly define behavior.[20]

Reference was made earlier to the basic assumptions governing the socialization of the Bang Chan child. When the child enters the world of human beings, he is already a partially formed and psychologically independent individual, with his own *?upanisaj* (ingrained character) and *khwaan* (soul-stuff), not to mention his stock of accumulated merit and demerit from countless previous lives which predetermines his character. The effect of these definitions is not only to award to the child a sense of psychic individuality that is partially[21] independent of any social environment to which he is exposed, but to assign to him a fundamental sense of psychological equality. We are not speaking here of social equality. The

[20] From a strict analytic point of view, it would probably be best to consider Buddhist doctrine as an abstract, codified representation of these premises rather than consider the premises as explicit, logically coherent deductions from Buddhist doctrine. To be sure, many Bang Chaners often explain and justify their actions by pointing directly to Buddhist doctrine, sometimes applying its tenets correctly, and sometimes not. But for most, Buddhism is a diffuse, ubiquitous *Weltanschauung*, the precise effects and applications of which the villagers are typically unconscious. It would probably not be incorrect to think of most religious "traditions," particularly the "Great" codified ones, as functioning in this way.

[21] The term "partially" is inserted here to indicate that despite these ontological notions, few villagers, as J. R. Hanks (1959) points out, ever consider "any human child so marvelously endowed . . . from previous existences that training is unnecessary." The child's *?upanisaj*, *khwaan*, merit and demerit, as well as his *winjaan* (psychological motive power), *caj* (heart), and *phroomlikhid* ("the lines of his destiny as established by Brahma") are all crucial predeterminants of his character. But few Bang Chaners ever think of a person's character as due solely to the uncontrolled emergence of these pre-natal forces. Rather, they represent the basic psychological raw material with which parents and other socializing agents must work, and set the limits of these agents' enculturating efforts. What is important is that the limits—the "degrees of freedom" permitted the parents—tend to be narrowly defined. Intensive probing of informants indicates that there is no general agreement on whether these cosmological forces are more or less influential than parental training in shaping a child, although they tend to be invoked more frequently as explanations of negative characteristics and of unusual happenings, positive as well as negative, in the lives of individuals. Also, villagers are inclined to think of them as the reasons behind *particular* characteristics and events, assigning to parental training a more diffuse influence in the development of the child. Thus, when asked why a particular individual grew up to be a *nagkleeng* (an aggressive, daring, sometimes bullying type of person) and how one of their fellow Bang Chaners had grown up to become an admiral in the Thai Navy, informants attributed the character and success of these individuals respectively to their *?upanisaj* and *kam*. (*Kam*, the Thai derivative of *karma*, is the proportion of merit to demerit that a person may have at any particular moment in

arbitrary, were it not for the Buddhist temples, a neighboring government-operated primary school, and a few small stores, all of which provide a center for the community. There the inhabitants paddle their boats for religious observances, their children attend school, and anyone with a few minutes gossips over a cup of coffee. These people, furthermore, speak of themselves when outside the community as coming from Bang Chan, and the temple familiarly called "Wat Bang Chan" helps outsiders to identify the particular area. 361 621

The community's 1600 inhabitants live in one of seven hamlets, each with an officiating headman who may offer some leadership to the neighborhood. Bang Chan has no political unity beyond the informal influence of the head priest at the temple, for administrative units of local government disregard its social and psychological coherence. On one side of the main canal headmen go a rough two miles to attend meetings with the District Officer, while their neighbors across the canal must spend half a day on the canal to reach the district offices which govern them. 161 621 634 624

As the survey results indicate, about 80 per cent of the households receive the major portion of their income from cultivating rice, though many of these men and women turn briefly to other occupations during the slack season. The remaining fraction is divided between persons engaged in trade as storekeepers or vendors and those in such service occupations as highway labor or school janitor. 621 243 434 443 464

A little less than half of the population owns the land or a portion of the land it works, the remainder renting from neighbors and landholders living away from Bang Chan. Though land becomes scarcer every year and its subdivision into small plots finer, land problems and landlord problems are not important concerns of the area farmers. Economic factors also grant higher status within the community to land holders than to renters and the landless. Age also age and religious piety bring respect. But social structure articulates flexibly enough to afford a young renter of good reputation and energy a decent hearing at a meeting, and indeed, he might carry his point in a group of wealthy landholders. Two or three times in past generations young men have moved from thatched houses in Bang Chan to high government positions in Bangkok through fortunate connections that enabled them to attend leading schools, as well as through their own industry. People rarely invoke the Buddhist concept of accumulating merit in present and past lives through good deeds when they comment on the rise of such persons, for with sufficient merit all is possible. Thus regularity in the socio-economic order becomes a moderate level of probability admitting many exceptions. 423 427 554 621 [555] [771].